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An example of science students' interaction in a foreign language for the implementation of inter-university research projects

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Abstract

This article presents an activity which aimed at allowing the students interact with their peers in a foreign language in order to increase their participation level in the research field, to enable them to use the specialized language in written and oral communication and to make them develop scientific communication skills. The activity was carried out in several phases, starting with the selection of the topics by the teachers members of the project and the constitution of the teams (according to the students' choice). The activity itself included three important phases: the establishment of contacts between the students, the on-line communication among the students of every team, in order to build the work plan and to fix the deadlines and finally, the presentations of the projects. Five projects were presented in one of the sections of the International symposium "New strategies in language teaching in a multidisciplinary perspective", on March 29th, 2013, at the "Alec Russo" State University of Bălți, Republic of Moldova. The field areas were: food legislation; ecology and environmental protection in international humanitarian law; animal ethics and animal welfare. The activity involved 21 students and 6 teachers as coordinators from the five partner universities from three countries (Romania, Moldova and Croatia) and constituted a possible approach for the scientific research teamwork, by integrating the information and communication technologies in the context of the intercultural communication.

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1. Introduction

Science students have to use specialized literature and to carry out research in a foreign language, without always having the skills and the tools for identifying the results which are adequate to their needs. Moreover, the

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teamwork for the implementation of a research project requires the use of a well-organized approach involving precise deadlines and tasks (Bogáthy & Sulea : Chapter 18. The management of the academic group activities; see also Guichon for further discussion on the task-based language teaching: page 110 and following).

The main objective of the inter-university partnership created in November 2012 is, as indicated by the title of the project: “Strengthening of French Language and of Research in French for the non-specialist students in a multicultural and French-speaking environment”. Financed by the Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie and taking place over the period 2012-2014, the partnership involves five universities: three from Romania: the “Ion Ionescu de la Brad” University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Iași (coordinating university), the University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Cluj-Napoca, the “Dunărea de Jos” University of Galați; one from the Republic of Moldova: the “Alecu Russo” State University of Bălți, and one from Croatia: the University of Zagreb.

The target group consists of teachers of French as a foreign language (FLE), by teachers of French for specific purposes (FOS), by teachers of specialized disciplines and also by science students who learn French as an optional discipline. The current structure of the consortium guarantees a balance between FLE/FOS teachers already having some experience and young teachers of French language; the team also includes teachers of non-linguistic disciplines (DNL) who bring their major contribution to the fulfillment of the project objectives. There are currently fourteen teachers of FLE/FOS and two teachers of specialized disciplines.

By means of questionnaires (based on the model set out by Abry: 26-30), the general framework of collaboration identified the training needs of science students, a public well-defined and with precise aims, needing French for activities of an academic orientation (research grants, professional contacts with the persons in charge of internships, research activities during various trainings) or for a professional activity (practical internship). The specific aims of the project are: to increase the participation of the Non-French majors in research activities in French in the applied life sciences disciplines; to encourage the production and the dissemination of knowledge in fields connected to French teaching and to the teaching in French; to strengthen the attractiveness of the French courses for non-French majors, in line with the latest developments of the research on the didactics of French for specific purposes in a multilingual international context; to ensure the networking of students, researchers and teachers, leading to the harmonization of methods and contents by sharing common tools and reference materials (Petrea : 17-18).

The activities planned and implemented until now in this project included the protocol of collaboration and the distribution of the tasks by the partners, the on-line communication between students, the missions of scientific cooperation, the organization of a symposium, a workshop and a training (Velescu : 169-176). If French remains a language of communication in the international context, it is largely because it is a language of inter-university communication, of scientific and professional exchanges (see Presentation document, Project “Support for the teaching of and in French, 2011, AUF).

2. Presentation of the activity: aims, public and implementation timetable

During the first meeting of the project team (in May, 2012), the participant teachers established the list of common fields of the courses taught in the consortium, as well as the general themes to be proposed to the students for the activity “Organization of the on-line communication between the students of the partner establishments (identification of the corpus)”. The themes were: food legislation, ecology and environmental protection in international humanitarian law, animal ethics and animal well-being.

The main aim of the activity, such as written in the application form of the project, was to “Facilitate the peer-to-peer interaction between students in the foreign language in order to share and develop skills in their training fields”. The secondary objectives were to: establish a corpus of on-line interaction; use the French specialized terminology in written and oral communication; strengthen the learners’ skills on 3 levels: information research, learning organization, communication and interaction.

Six teachers appointed by the consortium to ensure the coordination of the activity received the options of the

students, who freely expressed their intention to take part in the project, by choosing one of the themes, according to their specialty. The calendar included three phases, from November 2012 till March 2013, as it follows: *Phase 1: Contact between teams organized by theme*; *Phase 2: On-line communication (via Yahoo Messenger, Skype, Facebook) between the students*; *Phase 3: Presentation of the projects*, at the International Scientific Symposium “New strategies in language teaching in a multidisciplinary perspective”, on March 29th, 2013, at the “Alecu Russo” State University of Bălți, Republic of Moldova.

3. The development of the activity

The activity involved twenty-one students, from all the universities members of the project: six students from the “Ion Ionescu de la Brad” University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Iași (agriculture, food control and food safety, veterinary medicine), four students from the “Dunărea de Jos” University of Galați (law), two students from the “Alecu Russo” State University of Bălți (law), two students from the University of Zagreb (veterinary medicine) and seven students from the University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Cluj-Napoca (agriculture, horticulture, veterinary medicine, food control and food safety).

Five teams were built, each of them including students from at least two universities of the consortium, as it follows: a team (Team 1) who worked on food legislation and food safety, consisted of two students from Galați, three from Cluj and two from Iași; a team (Team 2) who worked on environmental law and sustainable development, consisted of one student from Bălți, one from Galați and one from Iași; a team (Team 3) who worked on the environmental policy in the European Union, consisted of one student from Bălți, one from Galați and one from Iași; a team (Team 4) who worked on horse’s intelligence and behavior, consisted of two students from Iași and one from Zagreb; a team (Team 5) who worked on the well-being of the animals, consisted of four students from Cluj and one from Zagreb. The medium language of the activity was French.

The first phase of the activity (*Contact between teams organized by theme*) had the following communicative and functional purposes: greet somebody; introduce himself or herself; speak about his/her studies and life environment; express his/her opinion; ask for information; write an e-mail; adapt the language register to the context; accept/refuse a proposal (see the CEFR: 82 and following). The students exchanged on their studies, hobbies and agreed on the on-line meeting details.

The second phase, *On-line communication (via Yahoo Messenger, Skype or Facebook) between the students* of every team offered a larger autonomy to the participants, who had the choice of the on-line communication venue. The number of meetings, their duration and their frequency were also established by every team, according to their needs, while meeting the deadlines for the writing of the project plan (December 2012 – January 2013). The teams adopted various approaches: certain members did some research on the theme before the on-line meeting, the sharing and the final choice of the aspects to be studied and the distribution of the parts to be drafted being the result of one or maximum two on-line discussions; other teams shared first of all their existing knowledge on the theme, made proposals on the aspects to be deepened and distributed the tasks afterward. Just like for the first phase, the history of the exchanged e-mails and of the on-line discussions was provided to the coordinating teachers. They validated the project plans, following either a face-to-face discussion (when the team leader worked in the French classes with the teacher-coordinator), either an e-mail discussion.

From February to the middle of March 2013, the students’ teams undertook an extensive documentation work on the topics of their projects, by consulting materials such as scientific articles (on-line or printed, at the university library or in on-line databases), books, on-line resources, etc. This phase was accompanied by the coordinating teachers and it required the students to use certain academic skills (Bogáthy & Sulea : Chapter 7, How to read critically a scientific paper).

The penultimate phase involved the writing of a scientific presentation in French, in PowerPoint, according to the standards validated by the coordinating teachers and supervised by one of the teachers members of the project who teaches courses of Communication skills at the “Dunărea de Jos” University of Galați (see Drăgan: 10 and following; see also Bogáthy & Sulea : Chapter 16.2, Types of presentations).

The final phase of the activity took place on March 29th, 2013, within the framework of the international scientific symposium “New strategies in language teaching in a multidisciplinary perspective”, held at the “Alecu Russo” State University of Bălți, Republic of Moldova. With participants from five countries, the presentations of the symposium aimed to discuss the current challenges of teaching French as a foreign language, from a pedagogical, methodological, terminological and communicative point of view, and also to highlight the latest developments in didactics. Therefore, the communication sessions and the workshops of the colloquium were organized around three themes:

- Current developments in the didactics of FLE/FOS, with the following thematic axes: The linguistic dimension in foreign language teaching/learning; Methodological options in foreign language teaching; ICT in language classes; CEFR and its applications in FOS classes;
- Communication in an academic context, with the following thematic axes: Challenges for pedagogical communication in an academic context; Communication strategies in an academic context;
- Perspectives in teaching non-linguistic disciplines (NLD), with the following thematic axes: State of play of teaching scientific and technical disciplines; Elaboration of interdisciplinary tools; French in DNL courses.

Considering the thematic axes of the symposium and the participation of teachers of foreign languages, of pedagogy and psychology, of communication sciences, as well as teachers of specialized disciplines, the presentations of the students' projects found their well-justified place in the plenary session and gave rise to very enriching exchanges (Figures 1 and 2). The potential of the ICT for language learning was increased by this experience which conjugated creative pedagogy and technological advances (Guichon: 119).



Fig. 1 and 2: Presentations of the projects

4. Conclusions and perspectives

The activity that we described in this article involved 21 students and 6 teachers (as coordinators) from five partner universities from three countries (Romania, Moldova and Croatia) and was meant to be an example of a possible approach and model for scientific research teamwork by integrating the information and communication technologies in the context of intercultural communication. The activity reached its objectives, i.e. to make the students interact with their peers in a foreign language in order to increase their level of participation in the research circuit, to enable them to use the foreign language in written and oral communication and to make them acquire scientific communication skills. The participation to the project allowed the students to acquire and / or to strengthen their professional skills on three levels (knowledge, know-how, social skills), so that they can become specialists more open to mobility, multiculturalism and multilingualism.

To help their empowerment, the coordinating teachers added activities of metacognitive reflection on to allow students to express their thoughts of and experience with the activity. It would be also desirable to involve more subject matter academics, for methodological aspects and for their specific knowledge (see also Bonneu &

Eisenbeis: 251). Our activity meets one of the major objectives of language teaching: proving that teaching and learning in a language adds as much value as teaching and learning that specific language (if not more, as the international dynamics shows it). This way, education rises to the dimension of the transdisciplinarity and moves the emphasis on the acquisition of multifunctional skills of a linguistic, professional, communicative and intercultural nature.

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